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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001169

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, PM/FO  
ALSO FOR IO ACTING A/S HOOK, WARLICK  
P FOR HMUSTAFA, RRANGASWAMY  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEARING UP FOR THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE

REF: A. BEIRUT 766  
[B](#). BEIRUT 733

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (C) Parliament begins debate on the government policy statement on August 8, with the confidence vote expected a few days thereafter. President Sleiman travels to Damascus August 13-14, after which time he is expected to convene the National Dialogue. Preparations are under way; Baabda Palace has begun issuing invitations and has set up a steering committee to determine the Dialogue's format, although it is not in a hurry to set a start-up date. End summary.

PREPARATIONS UNDER WAY  
FOR NATIONAL DIALOGUE  
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[1](#)2. (C) Nazem Khoury, Political Advisor to President Sleiman, told A/DCM and Senior LES Political Advisor on August 7 that he is in the process of inviting the 14 political leaders that participated in the 2006 National Dialogue (and the July 2007 St. Cloud and May 2008 Doha negotiations, though Hizballah is now represented by Mohamad Fneish) to a new National Dialogue to discuss Lebanon's national defense strategy and other issues. Khoury reported he had received initial positive replies, but some in March 8 were pushing to include other March 8 allies. (Note: Khoury did not specify, but we assume he means Druze opposition leader Talal Arsalan and the Syrian Socialist National Party, among others). March 8 reportedly also is trying to exclude parties that are not represented in parliament (implying Amine Gemayel's Kataeb, but which would also exclude Marada leader Suleiman Franjeh), though Khoury noted that Kataeb's lack of representation was due to assassinations. Khoury said he had invited all three Armenian parties (Tashnaq, Henshaq, and Ramgavar) because they agreed to rotate their participation at the Dialogue table.

[1](#)3. (C) Khoury refused to specify a start-up date for the Dialogue, commenting only that "we should not rush things." He confirmed that Baabda Palace was seeking the technical assistance of the office of the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL), as an impartial body, to prepare the conference, and that he also had formed a steering committee to determine the format of the Dialogue. He did not yet know

the level of the Arab League participation, guessing that SYG Amr Moussa might limit his participation to the opening session.

14. (C) In a separate meeting on August 8 with Charge, A/DCM, and Senior LES Political Advisor, Speaker Berri's Senior Advisor Ali Hamdan said "expanding the dialogue does not make sense," and that it should instead be based on the "magic equation" used in 2006, i.e., the 14 major political leaders.

The Dialogue would address issues such as relations with Syria, the Palestinians, and Hizballah's arms. Expressing Berri's discontent with the lengthy periods in forming first the cabinet, then the cabinet statement, Hamdan said there was no excuse for the lengthy delays, which only undermine President Sleiman and the positive atmosphere that prevailed immediately following the May 21 Doha agreement. Hamdan hoped the Dialogue would begin by the end of August/early September.

#### PARLIAMENT TAKES UP CONFIDENCE VOTE

15. (C) Meanwhile, parliament is scheduled to take up the ministerial statement beginning at 1800 local time on August 18. Ali Hamdan reported that nearly 70 parliamentarians had requested speaking time, and that each would have up to one hour. They would speak in the order their requests were received, with Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun the first scheduled to take the floor. Following the interventions, the Siniora cabinet would have an opportunity to respond.

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16. (C) Hamdan told us Berri believed the debate would last through August 13. Hamdan believed majority leader Saad Hariri, currently vacationing in Europe, would return for the confidence vote. Hamdan predicted parliament would approve the cabinet's ministerial statement by a large majority, more than 100 out of 127 votes, adding that all of the opposition would vote in favor. He opined that March 14 Christians such as Boutros Harb and Nayla Mouawad might vote against, as they had argued for stronger language on Hizballah's arms. (Note: Harb and Mouawad, both losers in the latest cabinet formation, also spoke out at the May 25 election of President Sleiman to protest the parliament's failure to amend the constitution first to allow a sitting senior civil servant to run for president. The previous Siniora government received 92 out of 128 votes. End note.).

17. (C) Hamdan said once the vote is passed, he expects Berri will call extraordinary parliamentary sessions before the regular session scheduled to convene on October 21 to begin tackling the many issues that have accumulated since the November, 2006 walk-out of six opposition ministers and subsequent suspension of plenary sessions. The first priority is electoral reform, he said, adding that this was necessary to "complete Doha." Parliament would then have to take up legislation related to Paris III reforms.

18. (C) Hamdan was optimistic that President Sleiman's trip to Damascus (which Khoury, who probably will accompany Sleiman, said would take two days) would produce positive results. Economically, he opined, the visit would be "felt on the streets," especially in cities like Zahle and Chtaura along the Beirut-Damascus highway, as economic activity resumed between the two countries. Sleiman will spend two days in Damascus his aide Nazem Khoury, who will accompany him, told us.

#### COMMENT

19. (C) Speaker Berri called for the 2006 National Dialogue, which was held in parliament, though he attended as Amal party's representative rather than as Speaker. The 2006

session was suspended because of the July 2006 war between Hizballah and Israel. On August 31, 2007, on the occasion of Amal's annual commemoration of missing Shia Imam Moussa Sadra in Baalbek, Berri renewed his call for national dialogue and a national unity government as the only way to end Lebanon's political impasse. Although the Dialogue is now in the hands of President Sleiman, Berri has not been shy about pointing to the Doha agreement and upcoming Dialogue to validate his approach to resolving the country's deep political divisions.

GRANT